

Towson Presbyterian Church

November 10, 2019

“We Make the Road By Walking - Ch. 9” – *Moses & the Burning Bush*

Exodus 1:1-14 and 3:1-15

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In case you haven't heard, we're in the midst of a yearlong, church-wide study of the book “We Make the Road By Walking.” I smile when I say that because I can imagine some of you saying to yourself, “*Enough with the book study, Joel! We got it!*” Well, Rob and I are going to keep talking about it, because we believe in it. We really do. We strongly believe it is good for you to be reading this book. And you can sense our enjoyment of this book from our podcast. We are both learning and growing each week, and experiencing new insights and new ways to look at the Scriptures.

Last week we read Ch., 9 in “We Make the Road By Walking” and here's where we are in the story the Bible is telling. The book of Genesis ends with Joseph, his brothers and all their families taking up residence in Egypt, but as we turn the page and begin the Exodus story, we find that Joseph and his brothers, and the generations that followed them, have grown large and out of fear, Pharaoh and Egypt turn them into slaves. And it's in this context that Moses is born. He's born a Hebrew but raised an Egyptian, and Egyptian royalty at that. He grows up as a part of Pharaoh's extended family. After the story of his birth, Exodus jumps right to Moses as an adult. One day he witnesses a Hebrew slave being beaten by an Egyptian. Moses, we assume, knows about his Hebrew identity, and he murders the Egyptian who was beating the Hebrew and hides him in the sand.

The next day Moses notices two Hebrews fighting each other and tries to break it up. One of them says to Moses, “Hey, will you now murder me like you murdered the Egyptian yesterday?” Pharaoh finds out about the murder and is hunting Moses down trying to kill him, so Moses flees, runs away and ends up in the land of Midian. He eventually marries, starts a family, and becomes a shepherd, and that leads right into the story of the burning bush.

This is often seen as one of the best and most beloved stories from the Bible, and Hollywood's taken a stab at it and done fairly well. I looked up the Charlton Heston “The Ten Commandments” version of the burning bush scene, and for 1956, the special effects aren't that bad. “The Prince of Egypt,” an animated version that came out in 1998, does a really nice job with this scene. And the Christian Bale, “Exodus: Gods and Kings” movie from a couple years ago has an interesting take on this scene. You can check out those scenes on YouTube.

So Moses is tending to his sheep one day and he notices a bush that is not burning up. This is Moses' first-ever encounter with God, and God calls to him out of the bush and says, “Moses, before you come closer, remove the sandals from your feet, for you are standing on holy ground.”

Now, occasionally, when I walk into someone's home, I can tell that I should take my shoes off. Often, there's a sign right when you walk in that says, "Please Take Your Shoes Off." That's usually the first hint, but sometimes there's isn't a sign and I'm asked to take them off. It's not as common here as it is in other cultures around the world, but I still experience it occasionally.

Taking shoes off keeps the house clean, but it also signifies a respect for the house that you're entering. There's a certain kind of reverence you have for a home when you take your shoes off after entering, especially if it's not your own home. And how I've primarily understood this story in the past, is that God is asking for reverence and respect as Moses approaches. *Moses, you're about to be in communication with the creator of the universe, so take your shoes off, put your head down and listen up.* That make sense, right? *Moses, the Creator God is speaking to you, so approach with fear and trembling and just say yes to whatever is asked of you? Moses, don't mess this up!*

That makes sense, but instead the story describes Moses as not incredibly awestruck and filled with reverence. He doesn't bow his head and say yes to whatever God is asking of him. Instead, after God tells him to remove his sandals the story says he's filled with **fear**. But why is he afraid? Is he afraid of being harmed by this God speaking out of a bush? Maybe...but I wonder if Moses is afraid of being seen for who he truly is in the presence of this God. God sees who Moses is and still invites him to come closer, and by removing his sandals, God invites him to take off anything that covers up and glosses over who Moses really is.

I wonder if God is not asking for reverence from Moses, but is instead inviting him to be *vulnerable* and be honest and truthful with who he is. God is saying, "Moses, come to me not as who you want to be or who you think you should be, but come to me *just as you are.*" And that invitation, naturally, scares him.

I wonder, if instead of reverence, and fear and trembling before God, God desires for Moses to just be himself, with all of his gifts, and all of his skills, and all of his flaws. God is inviting him to become honest with who he is and to not be afraid to be open and vulnerable before God. Because right now, Moses is not yet the great leader we think of. He has not yet slammed his staff into the ground and said to Pharaoh "Let my people go!" He has not yet led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the Red Sea, and he has not yet walked down Mount Sinai with the 10 Commandments in his hands. He's not that person...yet. Instead, he's a guy who left Egypt as a criminal and buried his past in the sand and rebooted his life. He's Hebrew, but he was raised Egyptian and now he's married into the Midianites. Who is Moses? And can Moses even answer that question?

When God says, "Moses, take your sandals off, for you are standing on holy ground," I wonder if God is inviting him into something so much deeper than reverence and respect. God is inviting Moses to begin the journey of becoming his truest self, his most authentic self. And if he can do that in front of God and discover God's light and love and presence and acceptance, if Moses can tell the truth about his life in front of God, well, Moses is going to find out what he's truly capable of.

And if we can do that in front of God, we are going to find out what we are truly capable of.

The challenge is that vulnerability is not usually desired. At least, not at first. At first, it's scary. At first, it's threatening. Everything in us wants to protect ourselves and keep us safe. Keep us safe from anything that's uncomfortable. But our souls, our truest selves who we are at our core, our souls ultimate desire for us is to be whole. Not perfect, but whole.

And at this point in Moses' life we could say that his life is completely untapped. There is so much waiting for him. There are so many gifts and skills waiting to be unearthed. They are so many lessons waiting to be learned. There is a reserve of courage waiting to be found. There are numerous holy moments waiting to be experienced.

And there is a lot of struggle, too. There is failure and disappointment waiting for him as well. But for Moses to walk into what is waiting for him, God longs for vulnerability and honesty *more than* reverence. God longs for him to become his truest and most honest and open self.

One of the many things that I love about Brian McLaren's book is that he sees the transformative journey of faith that we are on as a great adventure, that challenges us to heroic tasks. And a fair criticism of the mainline church – Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Congregationalist - is that in our effort over the last few decades to not decline and to not die, we made faith kind of easy, and maybe a little too comfortable (I've done this myself), and we lost the sense of the great adventure we are invited into.

As Rob and I said in our podcast this past week, mainliners turned the 10 Commandments into the 10 Suggestions. *Try and follow them, but don't take it too seriously.*

We are on a great adventure. And if we don't ask ourselves to do the hard things, like being vulnerable and honest and open, it will be hard to find out what we're truly made of, and what were truly capable of.

And if we can do that in front of God, where we will always discover love and mercy and acceptance waiting for us, can you imagine who we each can become, and can you imagine the kind of church we can become?

As Brian says in "We Make the Road By Walking," we'll become that community of learners and seekers, alive in the adventure of Jesus, an uprising in a new way of living, transformed by the Spirit of God.